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Demonstrations of Learning for 21st-Century Schools

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As a third-grader, my grandson Carter had strong reading and computational skills, unending curiosity, and, like most boys, the inability to sit still at his desk for hours at a time. When his teacher saw him fidget, she'd give him an assignment that would get him out of his chair, at least for a while. That ended the day she sent him in the hallway to tutor his friend in a new math skill, and the teacher in the next room brought them back shortly thereafter because Carter was teaching his friend how to breakdance rather than how to factor.



NAIS President Patrick F. Bassett

For those of us in the education business who remember the decades when we were so worried about girls' achievement in schools, there has been a dramatic shift: young women will comprise 60 percent of the entering college class in many, if not most, universities in the coming year — and that imbalance comes after much unpublicized “affirmative action” preferential treatment for boys. It makes one wonder about all the “seat time” for boys (and for girls, for that matter, who seem to conform more willingly than boys, but not necessarily more advisedly in the long-run). It makes one wonder if all the emphasis on standardized testing shouldn't be moderated significantly with much more emphasis on demonstrations of learning, tangible “output” that can be collected and in each student's lifelong digital portfolio. It makes one wonder what assessments for the 21st century might look like in general.

This list of skills and values should be what independent schools guarantee — not for *some*, but for *all* students.

Of course, assessments should follow from, not dictate, what is important to learn. One year ago, I wrote a piece entitled “An Education President for the 21st Century,”¹ in which I cited current scholarship on the skills and values that will be necessary for students to succeed

and prosper in these turbulent and ever-changing times. All five of the sources² cited were in extraordinary agreement about the six basic skills and values that will be expected and rewarded in this century. Since the publication of that article, a sixth influential work has been released — *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need — And What We Can Do About It*, by Tony Wagner, co-director of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard University — with virtually the same list of skills and values.³

Conflated from these six resources are the following:

1. character (self-discipline, empathy, integrity, resilience, and courage);
2. creativity and entrepreneurial spirit;

3. real-world problem-solving (filtering, analysis, and synthesis);
4. public speaking/communications;
5. teaming; and
6. leadership.

This list of skills and values should be what independent schools guarantee — not for *some*, but for *all* students. It should be the independent school community's proposition for the future that will underscore the value-added of our segment of the education industry, more than even the best public and charter schools will be able to guarantee, at least for the time being. Lest we think narrowly about the self-interest of our own kids and their success, there is powerful evidence that school reform will be inadequate to meet the needs of our economy and nation; school transformation is what will be required. And for independent schools to meet the expectation of our privileged tax-deferred status, there will increasingly be calls for us to demonstrate the public purpose of private education. We will continue to do so through meaningful service learning — creating not just momentary good, but also the educational and cultural reinforcement of inculcating the habit of giving and serving. Yet given the scale of the challenges this nation faces, even this may not be enough to inflect education in the direction it needs to go. To this end, we'll need to do what we have the freedom and resources to do: model the change in schooling that must happen for all students, public and private, to succeed in a very different world.

When we think of the Singapore system, for example, we assume that Singapore's students outperform the world in high-level testing and critical thinking because of the nation's disciplined ("left-brained") approach to education and the self-disciplined work ethic of the students. While this assessment is true, it's also only part of the story. The motto of Singapore's education reform movement (as if they need a reform movement) is "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation." The Singapore Ministry of Education website indicates that "Thinking Schools will be learning organizations in every sense, constantly challenging assumptions, and seeking better ways of doing things through participation, creativity, and innovation.... A Learning Nation envisions a national culture and social environment that promotes lifelong learning in our people. The capacity of the Singaporeans to continually learn, both for professional development and for personal enrichment, will determine our collective tolerance for change."

As mission-based institutions, U.S. independent schools and colleges have a noble purpose: to educate students well. While the language and specifics vary, the intent of virtually all independent school and college mission statements is universal. Vision, on the other hand, implies and demands something different than mission — that one sees a future where something better will emerge. I hope never to read a vision statement that promises to maintain rather than improve, but there's that danger for some. While many independent schools are already on the train to the future, some are at the station waiting for the train to stop for them, and others are saddling their horses and looking to the past with optimism.

What has to change in K–16 education so the outcome is well educated graduates equipped for citizenship and problem-solving on a local, national, and global stage? Arthur E. Levine, past president of Teachers College, Columbia University, in his op-ed "[Waiting for the Transformation](#)" (*Education Week*, 02/25/09) argues that we need a system that "focuses on what students *learn*, rather than on what they are *taught*, and sets common standards for what they must learn,

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rather than common amounts of time for them to learn those things." Levine sees current reformers with the important but limited goal of saving lives in a system they do not see changing. He believes they are only

harbingers of what the conditions of an educational system failing the country at all levels will ultimately demand and produce: *transformers* who will invent an entirely new system with teachers as diagnosticians and coaches.

Toward that revolution's end, over the course of the past year, I invited a handful of college presidents and school heads to meet with NAIS to discuss our common challenges and opportunities and to engage in a conversation about transforming quality education in America, K–16. We have dubbed the group The New Vision Collaborative in order to signal the desire to re-think and to encourage re-engineering of the interface and goals of both ends of the educational spectrum so that students emerge from both school and college with the set of skills and values that will serve both them and the democracy well.

While the conversations in our meeting and e-mail exchanges have been wide-ranging, we ultimately settled on a simple strategy to suggest to the larger audience of schools, colleges, governing bodies, and the general public — one that we think has potential to be a powerful combined statement from the independent school and higher ed sectors. It is rooted in the most basic of concepts: if we could agree on what well-educated students should be able to do, teachers, schools, and systems could then “backward design” the means to those ends. The “essential demonstrations” that follow could be gathered in a student's electronic portfolio that follows him or her through the various stages of education, documenting and preserving stages of learning and presenting in ways far more comprehensively than standardized testing a student's preparedness for the next level of schooling. What we believe is that demonstrations of learning marry skills with content, develop the multiple intelligences, connect thought with action, and exemplify the skills and values for the 21st century that students will need from schools and colleges.

Here's a first draft of the demonstrations that we very quickly identified as key to graduating students who will be well educated and well prepared to solve the problems they will need to address as citizens in the future:

1. Conduct a fluent conversation in a foreign language about a piece of writing in that language.
2. Write a cogent and persuasive opinion piece on a matter of public importance.
3. Declaim with passion and from memory a passage that is meaningful — of one's own or from the culture's literature or history.
4. Produce or perform a work of art.
5. Construct and program a robot capable of performing a difficult physical task.
6. Exercise leadership.
7. Using statistics, assess whether or not a statement by a public figure is demonstrably true.
8. Assess media coverage of a global event from various cultural/national perspectives.
9. Describe a breakthrough for a team on which you served and to which you contributed to overcoming a human-created obstacle so that the team could succeed in its task.
10. Demonstrate a commitment to creating a more sustainable future with means that are scalable.

That list of six essential skills cited earlier in this article? Demonstrations of learning are how we would know them to be manifest in schools and colleges. And deciding what the right list would be for individual schools and colleges would be a meaningful conversation for faculty and educational leaders. So here's the charge: At your school or college, what is your list of *10 Demonstrations of Learning* that should be the exit ticket indicating the school's work is done, validating the student readiness for the next stage of schooling or life?

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Notes

1. “An Education President for the 21st Century,” Patrick F. Bassett, *Independent School*, Fall, 2008.
2. Five primary sources on the skills and values for the 21st century: (1) The government's blue-ribbon commission of education governors, state commissioners, CEOs of major corporations and foundations, The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, in *Tough Choices or Tough Times*; (2)

Harvard University's Howard Gardner, in *Five Minds for the Future*; (3) higher education's think tank, The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education in *College Learning for the New Global Century*; (4) the testing industry in the form of Educational Testing Service's GRE (Graduate Record Exam) required letter of recommendation from an undergraduate student's professor noting the *Personal Potential Index*; and (5) the public's opinion from a survey of the public's expectation for schools, conducted by Public Opinion Strategies (as reported in the *KnowledgeWorks Newsletter*, October 2007).

3. Tony Wagner's Seven Survival Skills, from *The Global Achievement Gap*: (1) Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving; (2) Collaboration Across Networks and Leading by Influence; (3) Agility and Adaptability; (4) Initiative and Entrepreneurialism; (5) Effective Oral and Written Communication; (6) Access and Analyzing Information; (7) Curiosity and Imagination.

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